

## Surviving the After-shocks of Racism: Reading Adrienne Kennedy and Suzan-Lori Parks after Katrina

Jenny Spencer

In the fall of 2005, Hurricane Katrina, complicated by governmental dysfunction at all levels, produced an American refugee crisis within U.S. borders that resulted in weeks of compelling television drama especially aimed at audiences who did not experience the disaster firsthand. During initial coverage, the impact of the event was intensified by the theatrical presence of eyewitnesses who helped newscasters frame the event in melodramatic terms: after hurricane force winds, rising floodwaters, and devastating property loss came heroic rooftop rescues, angry mobs, tearful reunions, riveting survivor testimony, and images of villainous neglect. The melodramatic form of narration brought heroes and villains to the fore in a way that pre-empted a more nuanced conversation that would place the event in conversation with other refugee producing international disasters.<sup>1</sup> The uniquely American dimensions of the crisis were further highlighted by Reverend Al Sharpton's complaint that the term "refugee" was "un-American," which pushed the media to shift its vocabulary to "survivors," "evacuees," and "the internally displaced."<sup>2</sup> Sharpton's intervention regarding the politically correct designation of hurricane victims was double-edged: by implying that the victims were primarily black and poor (although the suffering was experienced by many who were neither), he also reminded the nation of a long history in which minority populations have routinely been excluded from the rights, privileges, and guarantees associated with U.S. citizenship.

Unlike other racially divisive, and heavily televised, events such as the Rodney King riots, the Anita Hill hearings, and O.J. Simpson's trial (and more like early coverage of the war in Iraq and the events of September 11), the Katrina broadcasts made self-consciously emotional and humanitarian appeals to their audiences based on shared American values and ideals. Yet America's racial history became increasingly difficult to avoid as the disaster played itself out: those stranded by the flood and waving from rooftops, like those looting the local Kmart, may have felt themselves to be invisible, but the cameras delivered their predominantly black

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bodies to the nation. Repeated film footage of looting, usually by black males, alongside interviews with unconvincing, inept, or overwhelmed public officials, suggested a causal relationship between ineffectual government and the ensuing lawlessness. Once armed servicemen entered downtown New Orleans, observers could also witness how racial violence, as Rey Chow has put it, is not an exception to the rule of law, but rather a systemic function internal to the workings of the social body—the way things usually get “put in their place.”<sup>3</sup> Despite demographic differences among the audience, expressions of shock and anger in the face of blatant racial inequality emerged as an emotional through-line of Katrina coverage, though the overwhelmingly racialized nature of poverty in New Orleans should have come as no surprise. The power of the televised spectacle to draw such emotionally charged responses seemed due, in part, to the way in which the visual images were ghosted by past and recent historical events—from the destruction and management of the war in Iraq, to the tsunami victims of 2004, to student protests of the 1950s and 1960s, to the looting of the Los Angeles race riots, the deliberate destruction of the levees in 1924, and even the separation of families on the slave auction block. As Marvin Carlson reminds us in *The Haunted Stage: Theatre as Memory Machine*, such ghosting is always a part of theatrical representation, but such ghosting is not limited to the stage.<sup>4</sup>

The psychic, cultural, and economic losses caused by Katrina, and highlighted through weeks of television coverage, were shared by audiences on both sides of the racial divide, but responses to the disaster were not unified. Functioning like “the return of the repressed,” the shocking imagery provided a “wake-up” call for some, prompting life changing activity in support of disaster relief. It also triggered the usual ways that white Americans have dealt with racial issues in the past, from liberal protest to paternalistic concern, to more openly racist attempts to blame the victims themselves. From both liberal and conservative camps, concerns about the evacuees’ future provided the flip side of former neglect, often by ignoring the desires of the displaced citizens themselves, whose complicated relationship to the state includes a belief in democratic ideals and U.S. citizens’ rights alongside a recognition that they were not necessarily meant for them. Indeed, Katrina’s losses repeated and reinscribed a particular American reality that Anne Anlin Cheng takes up in her book *The Melancholy of Race*: that American wealth and ideological hegemony has been founded on racial exclusions and betrayals that continue to be covered over and disavowed, yet not entirely forgotten, and thus remain an animating force in current race relations.<sup>5</sup>

Bringing to light the complicated relationship between the dominant and the disempowered, Katrina coverage made audiences increasingly, and uncomfortably, aware of their own psychic and economic investments in maintaining the injured status of minority subjects. For example, most avenues of redress for citizens displaced by Katrina came at the cost of identifying themselves *as* an injured

group—uninsured, unemployed, homeless, impoverished, black. The same television exposure that prompted government action and increased donations also produced an insidious racialized discourse that eventually turned sympathetic disaster victims into ungrateful welfare recipients draining already overburdened government resources. Likewise, discussions about whether to rebuild or raze the Ninth Ward—taken up by environmental experts and city planners in the spirit of redressing chronic problems—affected a majority black population who first lost homes and neighborhoods, and then faced permanent geographical exile as part of the city’s cleanup and redevelopment plan. Such situations aptly demonstrate how racial identity claims in a liberal democracy can provide the grounds, at one and the same time, for social progress and continued discrimination. As Cheng notes in relation to the legal representation of minority groups in other battles, “The path connecting injury to pity and then to contempt can be very brief. . . . [For all parties involved] it can be damaging to say how damaging racism has been.”<sup>6</sup> Indeed, most literary and dramatic work that seriously explores the issues surrounding racial identity must deal with the contradictory investments in injury and reparation that affects not only raced subjects, but also the “constitutive” encounter with those who are not.

Just as “9/11” now refers to a complex of issues involving national security, the war on terror, and the U.S. relationship to the international community, “Katrina” now stands in for a series of issues that cannot be disentangled from the persistence and effects of racial inequality in America. As a highly accessible and widely experienced event, it can provide both teachers and their students with a ready resource and powerful point of reference in sensitive discussions of America’s ongoing racial history. Furthermore, remembering the visual and narrative power of Katrina’s televised coverage can remind us of what is at stake in the representation of race and how racial representation affects audiences in both conscious and unconscious ways. Unlike more complicated approaches to these issues in modern African American literature and theatre, Katrina coverage relied on historical framing and affective address that both produced and covered over its racially charged subject matter, creating a response that could not easily be contained or resolved by the familiar melodramatic and tragic forms on which newscasters relied. Although the affective experience for viewers was softened by the media’s ideological and emotional certainties, powerful feelings of loss and anger, shame and hopelessness remain. One could argue that the processing of these affects is an important goal in the re-reading, production, and teaching of African American literature and drama—or should be. While traditional narrative techniques might provide audiences with an easier way in to the history of racial oppression, playwrights associated with more specialized postmodern or avant-garde forms may offer visual and verbal effects—and a racially charged, intersubjective psychic space—that forces both black and white audiences to grapple more deeply, and less

comfortably, with what they see. Indeed, unfamiliar dramatic forms put audience address itself in question, which helps to explain the mixed reviewer responses that dogged the early work of Suzan-Lori Parks and Adrienne Kennedy, for example, as opposed to African American playwrights like Ntozake Shange or August Wilson, whose focus on exclusively black communities may offer a more familiar, or safer, experience for black and white audiences alike.

Clearly, the personal history and experience viewers bring to the theatre, and to the events they witness on the news, will affect the reception of any representation. As Susan Bennett reminds us, audience response is notoriously difficult to assess,<sup>7</sup> and the psychoanalytic insights that might help in this endeavor tend to resist empirical proof. With this caveat in mind, the article that follows considers the implicit audience address in early work by two playwrights who explore the affective dimensions of racial subjectivity in deliberately disturbing ways. Because mass marketed national newscasts address mixed, racially co-constitutive audiences with aesthetic frames and explanatory narratives that mitigate against the shocking effects events themselves can produce, it is easy to forget that the less accessible racial representations that appear in the work of playwrights such as Adrienne Kennedy and Suzan-Lori Parks address a similarly broad, racially co-constitutive audience. Both Kennedy and Parks make use of shocking, deliberately disorienting, emotionally compelling language and imagery that also draw for their effect upon the audience members' own relationship to a history of racism. Equally important, both playwrights pose questions we should ask as we watch the news: How can viewers repeatedly returning to the scenes of the crime, so to speak, address unresolved racial tensions in the present? If repressed and unexamined psychic realities fuel social inequalities and affect the encounters between races, how can we possibly move forward?

Building upon Anne Anlin Cheng's theory of racial melancholy and Jean Laplanche's notion of the "enigmatic signifier" in the readings that follow, I argue that current psychoanalytic theories of identity formation in relation to the processes of mourning and melancholy can illuminate the relationship Kennedy and Parks establish between the characters' and the audience members' experience of racism, just as the playwrights' own sense of racial identity helps make sense of their stylistic choices. Despite important differences in their work, neither Kennedy nor Parks attempts to "cure" their audiences of racial profiling, nor do they expect their audiences, whether black or white, to "get over" the grief involved in racialized identity formation. Such goals may underwrite even well intentioned political and pedagogical responses to national events that exacerbate racial anxieties and stereotyping: in these cases, newscasters, politicians, and teachers share the Brechtian assumption that if people better understand what they are seeing, they will know how to act. Kennedy and Parks, on the other hand, insist on exploring the painful psychic truth of racialized subjectivity as a symptom

of history best recovered in the material and psychic effects it produces in the present. As frustrated and angry witnesses to the televised coverage of the Katrina disaster might attest, sitting with sadness is not easy for audiences. The highly imaginative and aesthetically distanced dreamworks created by both playwrights allow audience members a chance to (re)experience racial melancholy—to sit with that sadness—without being overcome by it. Whether the black characters of their plays survive or succumb to the shocks of racism they face, Kennedy and Parks invite audience members to move through the racial melancholy represented onstage and to consider their complicated relationship to it.

### Kennedy and the Shock of Racism

From the very beginning of her writing career, Adrienne Kennedy focused her attention on the traumatizing psychological effects of surviving in a racist society, especially for someone whose sheltered, educated, middle-class upbringing seemed to prepare her for living in a different world. Her first publication, “Because of the King of France,” introduces the historical themes and personal concerns that return with a vengeance in later plays.<sup>8</sup> I begin with it here because this seldom discussed short story offers a more straightforward narrative approach to the dissection of racially marked identity that *Funnyhouse* more surrealistically stages, and it illustrates a psychoanalytical concept that will be helpful for understanding Kennedy’s later work. The story sets up a situation in which audiences are invited to witness and identify with a black girl’s first contacts with racism and through her to consider the way in which racial trauma assists in the formation of a racially sensitive identity. The story may also illustrate Franz Fanon’s belief that blacks suffer psychic damage the moment they encounter whites, without time to make it unconscious—unlike whites who, burdened with racial guilt, tend to suffer from “affective amnesia.”<sup>9</sup> The protagonist’s sheltered, middle-class background provides her with a disturbing link to both black and white worlds in the story.

In “Because of the King of France,” images that refer to the history of slavery, the French colonization of Africa, and the attitudes that facilitated it erupt in troubling ways to disturb the naiveté of a young black girl living in Ohio. The story opens with the laughter of siblings over their mother’s sudden, inexplicable, absurdly solemn memory of their cousin Sidney: “I wonder why on earth that boy went to the Virgin Islands? Of all the places in the world.”<sup>10</sup> It was a family joke. Years later, the narrator runs into Sidney, who answers her mother’s question with the words of the title: “Because of the King of France.”<sup>10</sup> Soon thereafter, Sidney sends the narrator a letter describing his life in Versailles with Louis XIV and explaining his abrupt departure from the music institute. There he had fallen in love with a Jewish girl, something unthinkable to their families; even his mother had told him its “the Lord’s will that you’re black and she’s white.” In narrative form, Sidney’s voice can be read simultaneously as angry, ironic, and insane:

Everyone at the Institute knows that Negroes are people who were brought to America from Africa and Africa is a black jungle where black pygmies with rings in their noses sit banging drums and distorting their pygmy bodies. Everyone at the Institute knows that Negroes are stupid people with woolen hair who shuffle and say Lawsy me and I gwine and black. Very black.<sup>10</sup>

Sidney claims to have begun a new life at Versailles. He is happy and eager to please the King, who commands his performance in the Hall of Mirrors. As the King's confidant, he learns of the plight of Monsieur Philip, an "ugly, small, stunted, sallow skinned" man that the King finds freakishly amusing, and all the more hilarious for being in love with his daughter. Sidney's performance is a "great success," and he expresses the King's own attitude when he describes his musical rival as a "vile Corsican," crippled, ugly, and hideous. But when the "filthy beggar" plays for the King and his daughter, Sidney (and by extension the young girl he is addressing) experiences something along the lines of Aristotelian *anagnorisis*, a shock of recognition that for both characters shatters the self-regard of a fragilely assimilated persona. He writes:

From those ugly fingers came all the longings, all the tenderness, all the loveliness that comes from dreaming alone in shuttered rooms that smell of turnips, all the fierceness that comes from being convicted to disgrace and inequity by God's will . . . the rage, the annihilation, the grief of race and the unchangingness, the eternity of it all.<sup>10</sup>

Here the story abruptly ends with the King's laughter. In tragedy, recognition indicates reversal, remorse, and suffering on the part of the protagonist, but a shock of recognition also refers to what audience members may feel when faced with startling, unpleasant, and disturbing images that nevertheless seem familiar. The very existence of Kennedy's story suggests the traumatic (as opposed to the uncanny) effect of the letter on the narrator, and the retelling of Sidney's own shaming event by this particular protagonist offers points of identification for both white and black audience members.

In Kennedy's story, class divisions as well as sexual inexperience hinder the young girl's recognition of the injustice of racial discrimination. The way in which she describes herself—a "spoiled college girl" who buys cashmere sweaters and socks with her initials on them—could as easily apply to white girls her age. Her father is a doctor, and she doesn't like "being cousins to poor people" like Sydney, whose father is a farmer and whose house smells of turnips. Not surprisingly, then, she resists opening Sidney's letter when it comes—"I could not explain it but I did

not want to open that damn thing.” The presence of the letter prompts memories of Sidney’s sad affair, his girlfriend’s unwanted pregnancy, and the entire situation that her family is too embarrassed to discuss. At the time, her parents’ reactions (“Why that boy thinks he’s white and he’s colored. He’s nothing but a poor little colored boy”<sup>11</sup>) reveal the way in which they have prospered by carefully observing and incorporating the racially differentiated “rules” governing black middle class society in the 1940s. Poverty, not race, makes Sidney difficult for the family to embrace. The narrator experiences the interconnected racial and economic injustice of Sidney’s situation only belatedly, and vicariously, through his letter.

For Sidney, the “grief of race” is tied not only to the racial prohibition that keeps him, like the Corsican in love with the princess, apart from his lover, but “the unchangingness” of such injustice, as represented in Louis XIV, the very image of France as a sixteenth-century colonizing power, who financed a lucrative slave trade between Africa and the Caribbean. An astute reader may wonder precisely what has changed since that time. Like the narrator, Sidney finds it difficult, initially, to empathize with Monsieur Philip’s situation: why should he care given the life he is currently leading? Like the young girl, the audience is held in a suspended state—knowing, and yet not knowing—until the abrupt ending forces us backwards to reassess the meaning of earlier details.<sup>12</sup> With the political and historical resonance of the King’s dismissive laughter reflecting upon the young girl’s past attitudes, Kennedy suggests the narrator’s own painful shock of recognition: suddenly conscious of the racism and class discrimination in which she herself has unwittingly participated, she may now share her cousin’s experience of humiliation, sadness, rage, and loss about which nothing (except writing the story and acknowledging the pain) can be done.

The issues, images, and emotions that emerge from the short story are very similar to those found in *Funnyhouse of Negro*, but the presumably “innocent” reader is more explicitly guided by chronological narration and is free, as theatre audiences are usually not, to repeat and reassess the process of education experienced by the young narrator by re-reading the story with its end in mind. Yet in all of Kennedy’s work, the meaning of strange, irrational, and emotionally evocative scenes that unfold in the present are linked in important ways to past events, both personal and historical; and the audience is positioned as witness and interpreter of the racial trauma to which her work obsessively returns. Jean Laplanche’s theory of seduction may help to explain the relationship Kennedy posits between trauma and racial identity, as well as the particular power of her address to audience members, who are themselves divided, melancholic, racial subjects sharing, for the length of the play, the same traumatic psychic space.

According to Laplanche, the process through which a child’s identity is formed involves the trauma or violation of receiving from the outside an “enigmatic signifier,” or “loaded” communication, that is both utilitarian and sexual in nature,



and not entirely understood. He uses as his primary example the sexual messages consciously and unconsciously sent to the nursing child by his mother. These adult “messages”—whether sounds, gestures, or facial expressions—are taken in by the child because they are so clearly addressed to her, but the child has no ability to decode them properly: what is being asked of her remains unclear. According to Laplanche, the “untranslatable” parts of the message are repressed to form the unconscious as a separate mental system, or what he calls the “not-yet-translated.” Later, elements of the repressed will return in “re-translated” form, connecting the original enigma to currently experienced feelings of sexual excitement, shame, confusion, or trauma. For Laplanche, it is the “afterwardness” or belatedness of such situations, and their connection to earlier messages “implanted” by the Other, that gives them their emotional charge.<sup>13</sup> For Laplanche, the repressed, “not-yet-translated” messages are primarily sexual in nature, but it is easy to see how racial identity (with its complicated relation to sexuality) may be informed by similarly traumatizing moments that work, like the concept of Freudian transference to which Laplanche compares the process, in a belated fashion. During such moments, the activity of “retranslating” formerly repressed, enigmatic signifiers involves a substitution of affects with the similar feelings of confusion, sexual excitement, or shame that accompanied the earlier, indecipherable, messages received from the outside—in this case from the overdetermined social coding through which race becomes marked, sanctioned, or stigmatized. Indeed, the power of the images and narration around the disaster in New Orleans provided a stage for just such a process of “re-translation” in which racialized trauma and the operation of “re-translation”—with its dependence on overdetermined visual images, repressed before thoroughly understood and examined—helps explain the mesmerizing attention with which viewers watched the disaster coverage and began to “see” a racialized discourse that seemed shocking, yet familiar. Expressions of relief that the French Quarter was spared by the storm may have seemed inappropriate in light of the devastation elsewhere, but they also suggested a connection to New Orleans as the site of Mardi Gras and vacation revelry, enjoyed at the cost of suppressing other painful facts about the city’s history and demographics that were revealed in coverage of the disaster.

In Kennedy’s story, an analogous process unfolds. For both the young narrator and her cousin, past and apparently repressed messages, not fully understood at the time, resurface during racially and sexually charged moments in which personal and social history is inextricably linked. Sidney’s complex and emotional musical experience in Louis XIV’s Hall of Mirrors produces, in effect, a revelation that “re-translates” in devastating precision the interconnection between his personal experiences and the social history that makes them seem inevitable. That uninvited message—especially the feeling of pain and rage on which the story ends—is directly addressed to the young narrator who, in turn, repeats the process by



narrating the story to the audience. Kennedy's decision to end the story where she does suggests that Sidney's letter has produced a shaming loss of innocence related to her character's privileged economic status, sexual inexperience, and unwitting cruelty with regard to Sidney's plight. The status quo represented by her parents' comments are later re-experienced as racist and unjust; and the story implies that such disappointments can be as traumatizing as Sidney's actual experience of racial violence. Like Freud in *Mourning and Melancholia*, Kennedy suggests that there is little difference between pain experienced by the loss of a loved object and pain at the loss of beliefs or ideals. The emotional charge of the scene, left as a direct address to the audience, returns the reader to earlier moments in the story that neither the reader nor the young narrator fully understood. (Situated with the author in a different historical moment than the narrated events, however, the reader may find the parents' comments shocking even the first time through). Similar to the "loaded" images of racial trauma that dominated the stages of Katrina disaster coverage, the psychological power of Kennedy's story comes from the belated nature of the intimate encounter with racial discrimination, which the reader most fully experiences once the story has ended. Like the affective power through which Katrina news coverage "re-translated" into recognition the experience of the disaster for witnesses who did not directly experience the event, the emotional impact of Kennedy's story depends upon the readers' past and personal experience of racism, whether as victim or unwitting perpetrator.

The disturbing "white" laughter in "Because of the King of France," its Hall of Mirrors, and theme of racial trauma directly carry over to the objects, characters, imagery, and setting of Kennedy's next work, *Funnyhouse of a Negro*. The work of postcolonial psychiatrist Franz Fanon, a family friend who was practicing in Ghana when Kennedy was writing her play there, provides a useful introduction to the play's themes, as well as its barely suppressed rage. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon traces the devastating effects of racism on the black subject in a book that refuted the relevance of prevailing psychological and ontological theories of identity formation for the black subject. The emotional power of one chapter, "The Fact of Blackness," emanates from a painful moment of recognition similar to that experienced by the characters in Kennedy's short story, when Fanon is reduced to nothing more than his skin color in the annihilating expression of a white boy: "Look Mama, a Negro!" Fanon writes that in such moments, "my body was given back to me sprawled out, distorted, recolored, clad in mourning. . . . The Negro is an animal, the Negro is bad, the Negro is mean, the Negro is ugly." Fanon's experience, and even the bitterly ironic tone of his writing, resembles Sidney's in "Because of the King of France"; and both here and in *Funnyhouse*, Fanonian mirrors play a crucial role. Whereas Lacan posits that the subject is formed in relation to the mirroring Other, his disorganized body, (mis)recognized but delivered back to him as a unified whole, Fanon's black subject suffers a reverse mirroring, a double

objectification, insofar as he cannot find himself in the mirror at all, but rather sees only a distorted projection of himself from white others. Thus the black man, for Fanon, exists in a zone of nonbeing in relation to whites, “an object in the midst of other objects,” “sealed” by whites into “crushing objecthood.” Prefiguring the bloody images familiar to Kennedy audiences, Fanon describes this experience of racialized subjectivity as “an amputation, an excision, a hemorrhage that spattered [his] whole body with black blood.”<sup>14</sup>

In *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, Kennedy surrealistically stages this very nightmare of nonbeing as her central character struggles to survive both the shocking interiorization of racial hatred and the revolutionary rage it prompts. Inviting directors to stage the action of the play “around” the waiting figure of Sarah, Kennedy places her “in her room with her belongings,” one object among many, while the language of the play is recycled (with slight differences) among the speaking figures, who emerge and disappear abruptly from the darkness as if in a dream.<sup>15</sup> Sarah’s white alter-egos speak first: Queen Victoria, the Duchess of Hapsburg, and the light skinned Mother, each of them haunted by the sexually menacing figure of the black father, who, knocking incessantly at the door, is “dead . . . [but] keeps returning.”<sup>16</sup> Sarah herself appears onstage, addressing the audience directly “with a hangman’s rope around her neck and red blood on the part that would be her face”: like her father, she is pointedly “the [dead] NEGRO,” with “wild, kinky hair,” and like her (insane) mother, a refined creature who idealizes European culture, knows that “black is evil” and has white friends.<sup>17</sup> Having a dead woman, whose tortured figure recalls a history of lynching, address the audience so matter-of-factly, and in such an intimate space (her bedroom), establishes a disturbing, psychic complicity between character and audience that cannot be adequately explained by the operations of identification.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, at any given moment, precisely whose nightmare, and whose anxieties are being represented onstage, the characters’ or the audiences,’ remain open to question. As a Negro, Sarah “wants not to be,” an assertion suggesting that she, like Fanon, cannot “be” a Negro because what she recognizes in the mirror is white. Thus Kennedy represents in an autobiographically inflected way the “massive psycho-existential complex” or “Manichaeism delirium” that Fanon discovered through his own case studies and hoped, through some combination of psychoanalysis and revolutionary writing, to cure.<sup>19</sup> While a narrative (or case study) may emerge from Sarah’s obsessive retelling of her situation, the play is designed as a nightmare from which she will not awake, and the sight of her hanged body dominates the play’s final moments.<sup>20</sup> The play positions the audience as witnesses, looking for clues to make sense of Sarah’s situation, yet resists interpretation, producing in the audience the sense of dislocation it represents.<sup>21</sup> Whether Sarah’s death is symptom or cure, suicide or murder is but one of the play’s undecidable features.

As many have noted, the entire play is staged as a funnyhouse operated by

two white characters, the cackling landlady, Mrs. Conrad, and Sarah's admonishing Jewish boyfriend, Raymond, both of whom mock, "mistranslate," and otherwise undermine Negro Sarah's version of events. Mrs. Conrad's version suggests that Sarah's father commits suicide because Sarah cannot forgive him; Raymond also views Sarah as a tormenter, and in the final words of the play, calls her a "funny little liar" whose father is still alive.<sup>22</sup> Despite carrying the oppressive weight of the play's final lines, Raymond's knowledge of the truth cannot be trusted. In view of Sarah's suicide and the presence of white characters who survive to explain it, Cheng's analysis of racial melancholy is particularly useful. Building upon Freud's and Laplanche's analysis of mourning and melancholia, Cheng turns to the structure of melancholy to explain the "self-impoverishing" yet strangely self-nurturing operation through which racialized identities are formed. This contradictory process of "negative" identity formation involves losses, of both people and ideals, which are resentfully incorporated along with the anger around those losses, which are directed against the self. As Cheng explains it, the ego consumes or devours those losses in a self-nurturing process of identification that then sustains it. Cheng's notion of "racial melancholy" is also located in exclusion (since one excludes or disavows the loss of the loved one) and thus informs the process of both white and non white racial identity formation. As she wryly notes, the last thing a grieving person wants to see is the return of the dead in the flesh. If the viewer of *Funnyhouse* is faced with a lynched dead body, who continues to speak as if alive, the terror of such a vision is located in part at the return of an historically determining figure that has been excluded from consciousness, much as the terrifying figure of the black man haunts the characters of Queen Victoria and the Duchess of Hapsburg. Negro Sarah, when speaking of the desire to be white, does so by losing/excluding her father, who then returns to demand his "rights." Negro Sarah suffers from the fantasy of assimilation, a desire that Cheng notes is always, and on both sides, accompanied by fear. The apparent indifference of the play's white characters to Sarah's death is likewise symptomatic of the very disavowal and exclusion that may have prompted Sarah's suicide in the first place. The dynamic of loss and exclusion described by Cheng helps explain the imbricated relationship between majority populations and the minorities they have both devoured and excluded, just as it helps to explain the complicated psychology of minority populations who feel impelled to assimilate.<sup>23</sup>

While much has been written about this play's surrealistic techniques and the colonized or "self-loathing" sensibility they appear to express, it is equally important to consider how the enigmatic quality of Kennedy's work addresses the spectator with an appeal to interpretation that defies explicit meaning. Whether white or black, audiences are compelled "to look at" and also "to translate" what appears as a racially traumatic, but ultimately undecipherable scene—one connected to a racialized imaginary that is undeniably part of American history and identity. For

spectators, as well as for the characters mirrored on the stage, there is no guilt-free place to position oneself in relation to Sarah's torment and death. Rather, Sarah's multiple selves represent, in embodied form, the "self-improverishing" and strangely "self-nurturing" racial melancholy that plagues both majority populations and their never quite assimilated Others. As the proliferation of critical writing about this play suggests, *Funnyhouse* demands social and psychological analysis, even as it refuses any resolution to the grief that Sarah's death represents.

### Wading Out of Racial Trauma

Although the surrealistic style and thematic concerns of Suzan-Lori Parks's earliest plays were undoubtedly inspired by Adrienne Kennedy, *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom* offers audiences a radically different approach to the representation of racism and the exploration of racial subjectivity with which it is concerned.<sup>24</sup> Whereas Kennedy focuses audiences' attention inward, to a tormented black subject who enigmatically addresses their own melancholic identifications, Parks focuses attention upon racially co-constitutive black subjects who have "heroically" survived the historical trauma in which viewing audience members are still implicated. In Parks, the hysterical and terrifying laughter of the funnyhouse is transformed into playful, punning humor that suggests the possibility of characters and audiences working *through* the pain of racial trauma, even if it cannot be left behind.

Parks indicates something about the theme and style of her play with its confusing title, the precise wording of which is difficult to remember. Is it *Perceptible Immutabilites*, or *Imperceptible Mutabilities*? Or perhaps *Immutable Perceptibilities*, or *Mutable Imperceptibilities*? Is the difference between these titles even perceptible? What might the differences mean? Do the things that change remain imperceptible? Is this the same as perceiving that things do not change? Do things change or stay the same, and how can we tell? Similar question were unavoidably asked as the events of Katrina unfolded. Have things changed or stayed the same, and how can we tell? Whose desires and fantasies are most perceptible as change is being envisioned? As a play about racialized identity on personal, social, national, racial, and even biological levels, *Imperceptible Mutabilities* asks and re-asks (in barely perceptible revisions) the questions "Who am I, how did I get here, and where do we go from here?"<sup>25</sup> As if aware of Cheng's analysis of racial identification, in which the ego devours losses that then sustain it in ways that are at once self-improverishing and self-nurturing, Parks reopens the wounds of racial identification in order to loosen the unconscious hold those losses may have on their subjects. More humorously than Kennedy, Parks returns us to the scenes of racial crimes, asking viewers to remember the buried history that underlies and motivates racial tension in the present.

Even more difficult to summarize than *Funnyhouse*, *Imperceptible Mutabilities*

offers a multiplying cast of characters in overlapping plot scenarios, which are separated into five sections. In Part One (“Snails”) and Part Four (“Greeks, or The Slugs”), Parks presents terrifyingly comic reflections upon modern African American family life, while the family section of Part Three (“Open House”) provides nineteenth- as well as twentieth-century references. Part Two (“Third Kingdom”) and its “Reprise” (between Parts Three and Four) exist in a space “in-between.”<sup>26</sup> The family sequences begin in the present, with three sisters who share an apartment and are being surreptitiously studied as animal subjects by a white “Naturalist” who delivers his lectures directly to the audience. “Open House” occurs in “Dreamtime” and involves the ending of the relationship between Aretha Saxon, a black maid and governess for white children Blanca and Anglor, and her employer, Charles. The section also includes a hallucinatory sequence in which Miss Faith pulls Aretha’s teeth with giant pliers while commenting on (among other things) the dimensions of slave boats as well as a scene in which Aretha is being forced out of an apartment being shown to her former charges. The last sequence involves a black middle-class family: Mr. Sergeant Smith waits patiently and improbably for his “distinction,” which he eventually wins by accidentally catching a boy falling from the sky (a catch that costs him his legs) while Mrs. Smith eventually loses her sight as she and her children (Muffy, Duffy, and Buffy) await with waning eagerness their father’s return.

The family scenes offer many contemporary parallels and associations, but Parks herself considers the “Third Kingdom” sections as key to the play. In the introduction to *The American Plays and Other Works* she draws a map of that space, a middle passage of arrows between Africa and America that is peopled in the play with five “seers:” Kin-seer, Over-seer, Shark-seer, Us-seer, and Soul-seer. Parks recently suggested to students struggling with these sections that they should “forget theory...they’re just people in a boat, without hope. Just say the words,” advice with a different resonance after Katrina.<sup>27</sup> Liz Diamond, who first produced the play, staged the Third Kingdom sections in the dark, highlighting Parks’s conception of a self-consciously liminal space between two cliffs, between dreaming and wakefulness, here and there, life and death, between the self in the boat and the “uther self” on the shore left behind. The repeating words and actions of the Seers are further repeated and revised by other characters in the play (as with the Mona’s repeated question, “Should I jump or what?”; the frequent requests to “smile”; the figure waving to the shore; or the question “what will I do for love?”), repetitions and revisions that suggest not only a relationship between the present and the past, but also a connection to the future and the importance of choices that these characters—however circumscribed—must make. As Soul-seer says: this is “The tale of who we were when we were, who we will be when we will be, and who we be now that we iz.”<sup>28</sup> Harry Elam interprets these middle passages as the liminal space between African and American worlds created by the white slave

traders, a condition that Cheng might argue is perpetuated by liberal discourse that defines group identity through injury. As he notes in the introduction to an anthologized edition of the play,

Parks observes this “third kingdom” through history and suggests that the changes, the evolutions, or the mutabilities in African-American identity and self-knowledge are virtually imperceptible. African-Americans still suffer from the feelings of isolation, dislocations, and alienation experienced on being brought from Africa and jettisoned into the “third kingdom.”<sup>29</sup>

Other critics have focused on Parks’s use here of migratory or nomadic experience in relation to African American identity. But the term “Third Kingdom,” like the middle passage and nearly every other concept, image, or repeated phrase in the play, has multiple meanings whose very linguistic instability produces a way out, as well as a way in, to the play’s racial traumas. In other words, the very acts of definition through which Parks establishes racial identity in relationship to injury, loss, humiliation, and pain are deliberately called up and destabilized in ways that allow for thinking racial subjectivity differently.

Parks admits to being obsessed with language: she reads the dictionary and is fascinated by the history of words and their mutable meanings.<sup>30</sup> That obsession gives rise to the punning energy of her work, the humor with which she approaches the most serious of themes, and the proliferating chains of meaning she hopes will work on the theatre audience like “plutonium.”<sup>31</sup> Unlike *Funnyhouse*, Parks’s plays are actually funny, but it’s a laughter that derives from and induces visceral effects: “Think about laughter and what happens to your body—it’s almost the same thing that happens to you when you throw up.”<sup>32</sup> Whereas Kennedy lures her audience into focusing on the multiplying fragments of a single identity (Negro Sarah’s), Parks’s audiences follow multiple, seemingly disconnected, stories that promise, without delivering, narrative closure. The real connections are made differently, through visual images and linguistic motifs that mutate in sometimes barely perceptible ways. *Third Kingdom*, for example, makes allusive reference not only to the middle passage, but also to third class, third world, the middle way, or transformational third space described by postmodern spatial theorists like Edward Soja,<sup>33</sup> and the character Verona’s favorite television show about Africa, *Wild Kingdom*. Third space also refers to the moment of “imperceptibility” that Homi Bhabha suggests decenters Western authority, the supplementary space “outside” or uncannily beside history, the “non space” from which modernity itself emerges and which only the voices of the “marginalized, displaced and diasporic” can make visible.<sup>34</sup> As many have noted, Parks’s entire oeuvre could be described in terms of excavating the gaps, fissures, and holes of history into which the African American subject

has disappeared. Equally important, Third Kingdom refers to the three spheres of scientific classification—animal, vegetable, and mineral—and the play’s title to the nearly imperceptible changes of genetic mutability that determine the course of Darwinian evolution. At one point in the Third Kingdom section, the seers (who also serve as our historical witnesses) dream of jumping off the boat, facing a shark, becoming a shark, and then coming on shore: together they speak “and I whuduhn’ me no more and I whuduhnt no fish. My new Self was uh 3rd Self made by thuh space in between.”<sup>35</sup> This evolutionary image of crawling from the water onto land co-exists with the image of Africans thrown overboard during the middle passage, and thus to a history that is linked by blood to ancestors who survived, as well as to history that has been lost.

Parks’s interest in the shocking history of racial classification is also humorously engaged in the play’s opening sections: for example, Verona is shocked and dismayed to discover that Marlin Perkins, the Naturalist who narrates *Wild Kingdom*, has a gun. The situation mirrors that of the pedantic white Naturalist whose scientific experiment involves closely examining his African American female subjects from an oversized roach costume. Positioning his audience as students, the white professor highlights the audience’s complicity in the experiment simply by watching the play. A student of science herself, Verona takes up the Naturalist’s podium at the end of Part One and recounts past experiences with, and experiments on, her insufficiently obedient dog. Apparently oblivious to the irony, she has become a euthanasia specialist who gleefully “wipes out” dogs as a “humane alternative,” dissecting these “disagreeable creatures” only to find inside: “Nothing different. Everything in its place. Do you know what that means? Everything in its place? That’s all.” Here Parks suggests that scientific observation and classification, and the history of experimentation on which it is based, is another kind of violence that tends to discover what is already there and so keeps everything in its place. The importance of evolutionary schema to the play’s themes is reiterated in the final scenario by the Smiths, a family trying desperately to keep up appearances as they wait for their military father to return home. In the play’s penultimate scene, the children’s conversation turns to finding “thuh missin link” as they question the difference between mammals, turtles, fish, and camels in relation to the care of offspring. Duffy wonders how turtles know which eggs are theirs and whether hatched turtles know their parents. Disappointed to have so accidentally, and calamitously, won his distinction, Sergeant Smith speaks the play’s final lines in answer to his children’s question: “no we ain’t even turtles. Huh. We’s slugs. Slugs. Slugs.” The play’s first section is called “Snails,” a form of slug whose only difference is the hardened shell, the home they can carry on their backs as a result of evolutionary mutation. And indeed, the women of the opening section seem far more independent, skeptical, and intelligent survivors than the 1950s-like characters who literally lose life and limb in the never-quite-convincing performance of their



assimilated, upwardly mobile lifestyle. Mrs. Smith, for example, is determined to arrive fresh for her husband, as if she hadn't "traveled a mile, or sweated a drop!" although the trip involves an experience associated with poor blacks: "two thousand oh hundred fifty three stops. Three days on a bus. Was uh local . . . [W]e sat in the back."<sup>36</sup>

In spite of Parks's attention to scientific observation and classification as a major motif, the characters in the play are often misrecognized and have names that are not their own, a situation that implicitly critiques the pseudo-scientific creation of racial classifications in the first place. Molly is sometimes Mona, Charlotte is Chona, Verona names their "pet" robber Mokus "even though 'Mokus whuduhnt his name.'" Aretha Saxon wonders why she is called Charles, the name of her dead husband and current employer, Mrs. Smith wonders how she will tell if Mr. Sergeant Smith is *her* Mr. Smith, and Sergeant Smith cannot remember the names of his children. Despite their different names, Muffy, Duffy, and Buffy may be younger versions of the three grown up sisters who open the play. For Sarah in Kennedy's *Funnyhouse*, multiple subjectivities are problematic and painful, whether a psychic symptom of internalized racism or a violent expression of anger in the face of historically confining racial identifications. For Parks's characters, however, such "misrecognitions" seem more humorous, drawing for their effect upon both black and white audience members who "get it" (i.e., who understand, as survivors or witnesses, the sadly predictable racism that underlies the recurring joke). This is not to imply that the play's imagery is equally powerful for all audience members, or that misrecognition is painless. Indeed, the play's opening lines point to the pain that will be faced, before the end of the play, by nearly all the play's characters:

CHARLENE: How dja get through it?

MOLLY: Mm not through it.

Molly, who is jokingly contemplating suicide, for example, left school and then lost her job because she didn't "speak correctly," recalling for the audience those moments (perhaps barely perceptible to those not affected) in which a difference felt to be natural is perceived by others as a mistake. Misrecognitions are painful for the characters, and are even more so for the audience who recognizes the misrecognition as it relates to experiences in their own lives. Yet misrecognition also provides these characters with some protective cover, the shell, hardened by experience, to which the section's title "Snails" may refer. Mona, speaking about herself in the third person, wonders aloud "what she'd be like if no one was watchin'" and "what she'd talk like if no one was listenin,'"<sup>37</sup> something the Naturalist in the humorously ineffective roach costume hopes to discover. The phenomenology of the theatre suggests that Mona, with no one looking, would simply not "be," yet such moments return the audience to the violence of their own looking as well as

to the possibility of being discovered and misrecognized, in turn, by the actors in a live production.

The proliferation of misidentification in the play is more than a running gag. Connecting racial subjectivity to the experiences of both historical and everyday trauma, Parks suggests that the importance of securing identity—the basis of both social progress and discrimination in liberal democracies—may be more of a “white thing,” historically necessary for keeping people in their place (and thus not necessarily a goal worth embracing). The slaves of the middle passage were recorded only by their space in the boat; Miss Faith extracts and photographs Aretha’s teeth in order to add her name to “the book” before “extracting” her from her own apartment to make space for the prospective buyers, Blanco and Anglor. Toothless, Aretha cannot smile and so is not recognized by the two children she raised. Given the context, not being able to smile on demand is a good thing, but it terrifies Charles. For him, those teeth were also “the last of the verifying evidence” that can set her apart from others: “We won’t even know your name,” he complains. “Things will get messy.” For Parks, the establishing of bloodlines, archival documentation, the identification of the dead, history, and memory itself serve different functions depending on race and privilege. For Charles, whiteness as power is at stake. Before Aretha makes her own “histrionical amendment” and takes Charles’s grinning picture for her scrapbook, he cautions:

Memory is a very important thing, don’t you know. It reminds us of who we are, memory. Without it we could be anybody. We would be running about here with no identities. You would not know that you’re my—help, you’d just be a regular street and alley heathen. I would not remember myself to be master. There would be chaos, chaos it would be without a knowledge from whence we came. . . . Chaos without correct records.

In terms of archival history, Aretha notes simply that “We have different books,” and that difference complicates the audience’s understanding of the play’s concern with racial identity. In the about-face that ends the section, Aretha turns the camera on Charles and ignores the children’s crying: “Don’t matter none. Don’t matter none at all. You say its uh cry I say it uh smile . . . smile or no smile mm gonna remember you. Mm gonna remember you grinnin.”<sup>38</sup> Far from accepting the values and archival methods through which she has been victimized, as James Frieze suggests, Aretha actively takes control of the situation and frames it in a minstrel-like manner. Parks’s play takes pleasure in these small moments of comeuppance and invites the audience to imagine a world in which black is the norm and the narration of history no longer a white privilege.

In keeping with Cheng’s understanding of racial identity as a melancholy

structure of “negative” identity formation, both Parks and Kennedy appear to stage a process of identification that depends on the incorporation of loss, as well as its exclusion, and do so by acknowledging that racial identity is a complicated structure involving both fantasy and desire. In both plays, repetition is the aesthetic element that returns the subject to the scene of trauma in what can also be perceived as a self-nurturing process of identification. And in both plays, the white characters exist in a constitutive relation to the black characters they lose, exclude, dominate, misrecognize, or cannot see. However complicated the aesthetic logic, both Kennedy and Parks ask their audiences a series of relatively simple questions: *When I stage this scene before you, what do you see?* The answers inevitably lead to more questions: What is the racial pain threshold of the viewing audience? Whether shocking, emotionally realistic, understandable, or deliberately obscure, the affective power of the scenes addresses their audiences in both conscious and unconscious ways, positioning them according to history and experience. Moreover, white and black audiences are invited to see “through” the play’s white characters, in both senses of the word. What Raymond and Mrs. Conrad of *Funnyhouse* share with Charles and the Naturalist of *Imperceptible Mutabilities* is their inability to “see” what is placed before them in plain sight. In the context of Katrina, white racial melancholy also operated in these spaces between the known and the unknown, the seen and the deliberately unseen. For example, media coverage made apparent the racial myopia involved in many people’s memories of New Orleans: a vacation destination, depopulated of its real inhabitants in the visitor’s imagination, naturalized over time as simply an absence. Expressions of grief and shock over the destruction of the Ninth Ward were undoubtedly related, in a similar way, to previous losses, exclusions, and denials. In Cheng’s words, the last thing a grieving person wants is for this “lost other” other to return and to demand its rights.<sup>39</sup>

In *Imperceptible Mutabilities*, these lost others do turn up and ask for our attention, and do so in language and situations that are unselfconsciously playful, deliberately mischievous, sometimes even silly. The repetitious monologues of Kennedy’s *Funnyhouse* carry weight and mostly indicate Sarah’s tormented condition; ritualized incantations emerge from the brilliantly lit, masked, and reified stage figures in an almost demonic way. In contrast, Parks looks to the mutable, and ultimately transformational, nature of the words themselves to conjure a different reality onstage. Here, dreams are both nightmares and highly imaginative constructions that rework psychic pain. Indeed, words and images in *Imperceptible Mutabilites* operate like indexical signs that can attach/detach/reattach to objects of desire, demonstrating a process of identity formation that is located in fantasy, always in the making and open to change. In the Reprise, Shark-Seer refers to their dialogue in the way Freud referred to dream, as a “speech in uh language of codes. Secret signs and secret symbols.” And yet for the viewing audience, the historical nightmares to which the play refers—from the slave boats to lynching—are not

obscure. With truly black humor, Parks translates that history into verbal poetry that speaks to the audience from the darkness in a rhythmic chorus: the Seers comment on their situation, wave, throw kisses, rock the boat, and make choking noises. Through them Parks suggests that the past, though still with us, is also distant and different. Things have changed, if imperceptibly. The past, though not recoverable, can perhaps be recovered from. As the Overseer remarks, "I'm going to yell LAND HO in a day or so and all of this will have to stop . . . that will be the end of this."<sup>40</sup> Like *Funnyhouse*, *Imperceptible Mutabilities* can be read as a semi-autobiographical record of Parks's own past identifications with lost objects (African ancestors, parents, attitudes, ideas, and even bodily parts), yet she presents those identifications in a mode of racial mourning that, like jokes themselves, are addressed to a third party, charged by unconscious affect, and presented in a form already "worked through." While Kennedy's characters seem stuck in a self-alienating racial binary from which they cannot escape, Parks displays a more forgiving, relational theory of racial subjectivity with characters who persist in voyaging out, confronting, and working through what appears most threatening.<sup>41</sup> Like survivors of Katrina, whose identity was so often misrecognized in the media coverage, Parks's characters find themselves constantly, sometimes absurdly, looking to the future, even when the future promises more of the same.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For connections between race, homelessness, "forced mobility," and citizenship in the global marketplace, see Zygmunt Bauman, *Wasted Lives: Modernity and Its Outcasts* (Malden, MA: Polity P, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> Mike Pesca summarizes the debate in "Are Katrina's Victims Refugees or Evacuees?" NPR Reporter's Notebook, 5 September 2005. <<http://www.NPR.org>>. Sharpton's comments inadvertently played into a nationalist agenda that distinguished between the U.S.'s needs and those of other countries. President George W. Bush's refusal to accept outside help demonstrated his belief that humanitarian aid is something first world countries "own" and only failing or inadequate governments need.

<sup>3</sup> Rey Chow, *The Protestant Ethnic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Columbia UP, 2002) 15-7.

<sup>4</sup> News blogs attest to the range of historical events cited in relation to Katrina and its aftermath. For a more scholarly approach, see Jason David Rivera and DeMond Shondell Miller, "Continually Neglected: Situating Natural Disasters in the African American Experience" *Journal of Black Studies* 37 (2007): 502-22. For the importance of memory and past events to theatre reception, see Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2001) 1-15.

<sup>5</sup> Anne Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001) 7-20.

<sup>6</sup> See Cheng 14, 24. In *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*, Wendy Brown argues that the discourse of individual rights and liberty often elides attention to suffering by using "injury" as a limiting basis for political identity: "The state encourages the formation of political identities founded on injury and is in fact invested in maintaining that injured status" (qtd. in Cheng 105). Calling this "the melancholia of liberal discourse," Cheng notes how political health paradoxically gets defined through, and thus relies on, injury and illness.

<sup>7</sup> See Susan Bennett, *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception* (London: Routledge, 1997).

<sup>8</sup> "Because of the King of France" is reprinted in *The Kennedy Reader*, ed. Werner Sollers (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2001) 3-6.

<sup>9</sup> See Franz Fanon, "The Negro and Psychopathology," *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York:

Grove P, 1967) 150.

<sup>10</sup> "Because of the King of France" 3, 4, 5, 6.

<sup>11</sup> 4, 5.

<sup>12</sup> A similar situation happens in David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly*, where the psychic operations of the protagonist's fetishism is explicitly linked to a racialized consciousness. See David Eng, *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America* (Durham, NC: Duke U P, 2001).

<sup>13</sup> Jean Laplanche, *Essays on Otherness* (New York: Routledge, 1999). Laplanche's theory of "afterwardness," a translation of Freud's *Nachträglichkeit*, is similar to the notion of belatedness that Fanon and later Homi Bhabha discuss as a problem of colonized consciousness—the notion that the "negro" has arrived into the world as a fully human being too late, entering a world that is in every sense already made by whites. See Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* 120-122, and Homi Bhabha's discussion of time in "The Postcolonial and the Postmodern," *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994) 171-97.

<sup>14</sup> Fanon 113, 109, 112.

<sup>15</sup> *Funnyhouse of a Negro, In One Act* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1988) 1-2. Subsequent references to the play refer to this edition. Erin Hurley writes persuasively on the impossible demands and utopian dimensions of the play's abrupt lighting cues in "BLACKOUT: Utopian Technologies in Adrienne Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro*," *Modern Drama* 47. 2 (2004) 200-18.

<sup>16</sup> *Funnyhouse*, 3-4. To locate the discourse that circulated at the time around the phobic nature of white women's relationship to black men and the threat of rape, see "The Man of Color and the White Woman," in *Black Skin, White Masks* 63-82.

<sup>17</sup> *Funnyhouse* 4.

<sup>18</sup> Although making a different argument here, my understanding of this play and the process of identification it undoes is indebted to Elin Diamond, "Mimesis in Syncopated Time: Reading Adrienne Kennedy," *Intersecting Boundaries: The Theatre of Adrienne Kennedy* ed. Paul K. Bryant-Jackson and Lois More Overbeck (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1992) 131-41 and *Unmaking Mimesis* (New York: Routledge, 1997) 103-125.

<sup>19</sup> *Funnyhouse* 5. Fanon 12, 183.

<sup>20</sup> For that summary, see Robert Scanlon, "Surrealism as Mimesis: A Director's Guide to Adrienne Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro*," *Intersecting Boundaries*, 93-109. For analysis that pays closer attention to the play's psychic dimensions, see Linda Kintz, *The Subject's Tragedy* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1992) 141-64, Rosemary Curb, "Fragmented Selves in Adrienne Kennedy's 'Funnyhouse of a Negro' and 'The Owl Answers'," *Theatre Journal* 32. 2 (1980) 180-95, Claudia Barnett, "A Prison of Object Relations: Adrienne Kennedy's 'Funnyhouse of a Negro'," *Modern Drama* 40. 3 (1997) 374-85, and Elin Diamond (n. 15).

<sup>21</sup> See Kimberly Benston, "Locating Adrienne Kennedy: Prefacing the Subject," *Intersecting Boundaries* 113-30.

<sup>22</sup> *Funnyhouse* 17-19, 23.

<sup>23</sup> See Cheng 67-72 and 3-29.

<sup>24</sup> *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom* (Los Angeles: Sun and Moon P, 1995). Page numbers hereafter refer to this edition of the play. Parks acknowledges Kennedy's influence in an interview with Shelby Jiggetts, *Callaloo* 19.2 (1996): 314.

<sup>25</sup> See *The America Play and Other Works* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1995) 21.

<sup>26</sup> For helpful summary and analysis, see James Frieze, "Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom: Suzan-Lori Parks and the Shared Struggle to Perceive," *Modern Drama* 41. 4 (1998) 523-32.

<sup>27</sup> Public Lecture, Rand Theatre, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, MA, 6 March 2007.

<sup>28</sup> *Imperceptible*, 48. For Parks's deliberate use of the African American aesthetic practice of repetition and revision, see Kintz 149-50.

<sup>29</sup> Harry J. Elam and Robert Alexander, eds., *Colored Contradictions: An Anthology of Contemporary African-American Plays* (New York: Penguin, 1996) 14. For an interpretation focusing on migratory experience, see Kimberly Dawn Dixon, "Taking place as we speak: The construction, expression and interpretation of black female identity in the careers of Regina Taylor, Anna Deavere Smith, and Suzan-Lori Parks," Diss. Northwestern U, 2000.

<sup>30</sup> "Elements of Style," *The America Play* 11.

<sup>31</sup> Parks prefers the metaphor "plutonium" to "leaden" or "dense" to describe her work: "Plutonium moves, it has a great half-life, it's deadly. . . if it gets inside you, it can kill you. . . Plutonium is alive. Lead is dead." Steven Druckman, "Doo-A-Diddly-Dit-Dit," *TDR* 39. 3 (Fall 1995) 292-93.

<sup>32</sup> "Elements of Style" 15.

<sup>33</sup> See, for example, Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London: Verso, 1989) and *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (London: Blackwell, 1996).

<sup>34</sup> Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* 243, 246.

<sup>35</sup> *Imperceptible* 26.

<sup>36</sup> 23, 65-8, 53-4.

<sup>37</sup> 9, 7, 10, 12.

<sup>38</sup> 44, 38, 55. For Frieze's interpretation, see n. 22.

<sup>39</sup> Cheng 16.

<sup>40</sup> *Imperceptible* 48-9.

<sup>41</sup> Kelly Oliver defines relational subjectivity in *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2001) 10-39.

